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ABSTRACT

The study measured the perception of children in grades 2 through 8 toward their gifted classmates, based upon responses to a sociometric question. From the total of 868 students participating, teachers designated the gifted and non-gifted. Non-gifted subjects in grades 2 and 3 were asked to indicate which peer they would go to for schoolwork help if the teacher were not available. Non-gifted subjects in grades 4 through 8 were asked to respond to the same question regarding help in math, social studies, and science. The proportion of cases in which a gifted subject was chosen by a non-gifted peer was compared with the proportion of gifted children in that grade to determine whether the choice of gifted helpmates by non-gifted peers exceeded what would be expected in random choices. Among elementary students, there was a marked tendency at all three levels of gifted subjects to be chosen as helpmates. In grades 3 and 5, nearly twice as many choices went to the gifted as might be expected. Results were mixed among middle school students, with significant choices for gifted students in seventh grade math, but not in eighth grade math. Variability suggested that factors other than academics are beginning to influence perceptions of gifted children at that age. (CL)

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Non-gifted Elementary and Middle School Children's Sociometric Choices of Gifted vs. Non-gifted Helpers

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The status of gifted children is probably unique in American education. No other special group of children has been alternately embraced and repelled with so much vigor by educators and laypersons alike. Providing special enrichment to the gifted child suggests something uncomfortably close to elitism, while promoting egalitarianism reflects the ideal of helping the disadvantaged to climb the ladder of success. Tannenbaum suggests that as a society we have difficulty living exclusively with excellence or egalitarianism for any length of time. We're forced to drift from one to the other like the fabled Flying Dutchman--sailing eternally in and out of port (1983). Furthermore, as Weiss and Gallagher (1980) point out, society is quite ambivalent toward gifted individuals. They may be admired, but they are also envied and mistrusted. The problem under investigation in this study relates to how gifted children of elementary and middle school age are perceived by their non-gifted peers.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Beginning with Terman's classic study of gifted youth through 35 years, various authorities have investigated how the gifted, when

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special educational provisions are made for them, are perceived by other children. Gallagher (1975) cites several studies to show a positive relationship between IQ and social status, namely, that in face-to-face associations with schoolmates, children with high IQs generally fare better than do those who perform less well on such tests. However, the relationship between tested intelligence and popularity seems not to be perfectly linear. Tannenbaum, also, cites numerous studies on the relationship of IQ and social acceptance, but the studies focus almost entirely on middle- or high school-age youth. He reports few studies of elementary school-age children (1983).

"Snobbishness" is the label that immediately springs to mind with respect to gifted children. Some observation and measurement techniques may define snobbishness as the behavior of the bright child who solves problems quickly and easily and shows a little impatience at times toward the slow and laborious efforts of less-endowed peers. Others define snobbishness as open contempt toward less capable classmates. Either way, of course, the behavior of the gifted child is largely shaped by the manner in which others--parents, teachers, and even some other children in the gifted environment--react to his/her performing more effectively than others. According to Newland, however, "the preponderance of favorable perceptions of the gifted by their classmates, in whatever educational settings, suggests strongly that the gifted are perceived favorably, thus casting doubt on the validity of the snobbishness contention (1975).

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to measure a specific perception of children in 2nd through 8th grades toward their gifted classmates,

based on a sociometric question. Subjects were 228 males and 242 females in Grades 3,4, and 5 from three elementary schools, and 205 males and 193 females from a 6th, 7th, and 8th grade middle school located in a predominately middle-class suburb of Chicago. Each child was classified as "gifted" or "non-gifted" by his/her teacher. Non-gifted children in grades 2 and 3 were asked to indicate (with help from the teacher) which peer he or she "would go to for help if the teacher were not able to help you with your schoolwork." Non-gifted children in Grades 4 through 8 were asked to respond to the same question regarding help in math, social studies, and science.

In each comparison the proportion of cases where a gifted child was chosen by a non-gifted peer was compared with the proportion of gifted children in that grade to determine whether or not the choice of gifted helpmates by non-gifted peers exceeded what would be expected if the choices were random.

RESULTS

Among the elementary school children there was a decided tendency at all three levels for the gifted children to be chosen as helpmates. This was strongest in in the third and fifth grade classrooms, where nearly twice as many choices went to the gifted as might be expected. With third graders, 12.58% had been identified as gifted, but 24.86% of the choices were for the gifted. In the fifth grade, the percents were 7.63 and 15.14. In the fourth grade, 8.50% had been identified as gifted and 14.86% of the choices were for gifted. In every case, chi-square goodness-of-fit tests for the difference between expected and observed proportions were significant at the .001 level.

With middle school children, however, results were mixed. Among

sixth graders those identified as gifted in social science (7.33%) received fewer choices than would be expected (only 5.19%). In math the 6.00% identified as gifted received 6.21% of the choices, and in science the 9.33% identified as gifted were chosen 9.38% of the time.

Among seventh graders the gifted were chosen more than would be expected in all three subjects. The most notable difference was in math where the 9.09% identified as gifted received 19.60% of the choices ($p < .001$). In social science, 4.85% identified as gifted received 5.26% of the choices and 4.85% identified as gifted in science received 5.32% of the choices. Neither of the latter two differences was significant at the .05 level.

Among eighth graders in math, 10.17% were identified as gifted, but only 10.04% of the choices were for the gifted. However, in science, 3.95% were identified as gifted and 9.14% of the choices went to the gifted ($p < .001$). In social science, the 4.52% identified as gifted received 7.03% of the choices ($p < .05$).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Several conclusions may be drawn from these data. First, it is clear that in the early grades the children are aware of their gifted peers, and they are not reluctant to turn to them for help in school work. It is reasonable to believe that the sociometric responses of children at this age are spontaneous and genuine.

Second, the mixed results from the middle school data indicate that perceptions of gifted peers are becoming differentiated. For example, 7th graders turned to the gifted for help in math, but the 8th graders did not. The variability of responses throughout the middle school grades suggests that factors other than academics are beginning to

influence perceptions of the gifted child--appearance, personality, leadership, and gender, perhaps.

This study does not fully illuminate the domain of children's perceptions of their gifted peers. It does suggest, however, that awareness begins early in the school years. We need to learn more about the development of that awareness. Gifted programs are getting funded, and the definition of "giftedness" is expanding. Many young young people will enter high school carrying the label of "gifted." Will their peers continue to accept them as they did in the early years? This study adds to the database of research on the perceptions of gifted children in the elementary and middle school years.

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